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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 000073

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MTS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT RACING AGAINST TIME FOR MILF PEACE
AGREEMENT

REF: A. MANILA 2649 (MAGUINDANAO MASSACRE: INFLUENTIAL
MAYOR AND POLICEMEN IN CUSTODY)
[1](#)B. MANILA 2509 (INFORMAL GOVERNMENT-MILF TALKS
RESUME DECEMBER 8)

Classified By: DCM Leslie A. Bassett, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Philippine government and the insurgent Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are poised to continue difficult discussions this month on a comprehensive peace agreement, even as the Philippine government questions how much progress can be made in reconciling the parties' distant positions before President Arroyo leaves office in June. Philippine and MILF negotiators are expected to exchange drafts of a comprehensive peace agreement through the Malaysian facilitator during the week of January 18 -- at which point the parties will have a clearer understanding of precisely how much work remains to be done. Malaysia may consider stepping down as peace process facilitator, making its tenure coterminous with President Arroyo's administration. The International Contact Group has met twice to discuss its role in the peace process and the status of negotiations, although its cautious members appear reluctant to do anything more. Staffing changes in the government could potentially affect the pace or substance of peace talks. Meanwhile, in Mindanao, the MILF has engaged Muslim civil society groups about its vision for a new autonomous region -- and discovered that others have different ideas. End Summary.

AS ELECTIONS APPROACH, NEGOTIATIONS TO CONTINUE

[1](#)2. (C) A Philippine official involved in the peace negotiations with the southern Philippines insurgent group Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) told us that the government had moderated its hope of signing a comprehensive peace compact before the end of President Arroyo's term in June, but that it would nonetheless make an earnest effort. Philippine Peace Panel Director Ryan Sullivan said the Philippine government would exchange drafts of a final peace agreement with the MILF the week of January 18-22, as urged by the Malaysian peace facilitator, Datuk Othman. Philippine Peace Panel Chairman Rafael Seguis was under pressure from President Arroyo to make more rapid progress, Sullivan said. Arroyo had ordered Seguis to produce a government draft before the official start of campaign season in February. Both President Arroyo's and Datuk Othman's exhortations are now driving the Philippine peace panel to work quickly on a

draft agreement.

GOVERNMENT'S DRAFT AGREEMENT: BASED ON LAW

13. (C) The Philippine's version of the draft agreement, Sullivan said, would draw on the constitution and existing laws in its formula for granting Mindanao's Muslims' more meaningful autonomy under a new governance structure, but it likely would not expand the proposed territory beyond the current boundaries of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). According to The Asia Foundation Country Director Steve Rood in a January 11 conversation, two experts hired by Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) issued a detailed recommendation to government negotiators for grounding the peace agreement in Philippine law, but Rood suspected their insightful recommendations may not have been fully incorporated into the government's draft. (In 2008, the peace process collapsed after the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order prohibiting the signing of the 2008 territorial agreement. Bearing that in mind, U/S Seguis has consistently stressed to us his concern that any agreement not be susceptible to a court challenge.)

DRAFT AGREEMENTS TO BE EXCHANGED, REVIEWED

14. (C) Malaysian peace process facilitator Datuk Othman will travel to Manila and the MILF's Camp Darapanan on or after January 20, multiple sources told us, to receive draft

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agreements from the two peace panels, which he will review, comment on, and then share with both parties. The Philippine peace panel is clearing its draft agreement with other agencies, and may later share the draft agreement with two of the most prominent critics of the peace process: Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat and North Cotabato province Vice Governor Manny Pinol, both of whom signed the August 2008 petition that secured the Supreme Court's intervention to halt the signing of the territorial agreement. The government hopes that sharing the draft agreement with them at this stage would demonstrate its commitment to a transparent peace process and to addressing critics' concerns early on, Sullivan explained.

MALAYSIA MAY STEP DOWN AS FACILITATOR

15. (C) Malaysia may step down as peace talks facilitator, Sullivan noted, making its tenure coterminous with the end of President Arroyo's presidential term in June. Malaysia could be growing weary of playing the middleman and might not be interested in working with a new Philippine administration. Another factor, Sullivan speculated, could be Othman's personal desire to leave his position. If the Malaysians do relinquish their role, Sullivan suggested the International Contact Group (ICG) could acquire a more important role in bridging the peace process into the next Philippine administration. The government would consider Indonesia and Qatar as possible replacements for Malaysia, Sullivan said, but did not know MILF preferences.

INTERNATIONAL CONTACT GROUP MOVES CAUTIOUSLY

16. (C) According to The Asia Foundation's Rood, the ICG at its two meetings thus far has discussed the peace process in general terms, debating the ICG's role. The group, and particularly the Japanese and Turkish delegations, favors a cautious approach of taking action only when requested by the negotiating parties. This attitude stands in stark contrast to the UK's, which has advocated unsuccessfully for the ICG to show more independent initiative. ICG discussions, Rood said, are generally moderated by the most senior diplomat in

the room. Rood also noted that the MILF suggested to him in December that ICG members attend all formal negotiating sessions and provide guidance to the parties on those occasions, although it was unclear to Rood how such guidance could be furnished in practice.

STAFFING CHALLENGES AT OFFICE OF PEACE ADVISER

17. (C) Staffing changes at OPAPP could potentially affect OPAPP's ability to manage the peace process. Former Congressman and General Santos City Mayor Adelberto Antonino resigned as a GRP peace panel member in December. Antonino, closely aligned with Lobregat, has been overtly critical of the peace process, Sullivan said, and reportedly passed private OPAPP documents to Lobregat and Pinol. Antonino is now adviser to OPAPP's Chief Annabelle Abaya, and press reports have noted Abaya's intention to appoint a woman in his place. OPAPP A/S Camilo "Bong" Montesa is likely to resign before the election, as will much of the OPAPP senior staff whose tenures are coterminous with President Arroyo's. These changes could leave only the few peace panel members and OPAPP's core MILF peace process staff in charge during the run-up to and aftermath of May 2010 elections.

MILF AND MUSLIM GROUPS: DIFFERENT VISIONS

18. (C) As the peace process advances, the MILF has been conducting outreach to Muslim groups to discuss ideas on governance and leadership of a new Moro autonomous region. According to post's Mindanao-based contacts, MILF discussions with various Muslim groups in December and January revealed that Mindanao's middle class Muslims do not necessarily share the MILF's vision for an autonomous region steeped primarily in Moro culture and tradition. While some of our Mindanao-based Muslim contacts wish to see an enhanced role

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for Shari'a law in both civil and criminal matters in a new autonomous region -- as the MILF does -- they also want to retain democracy and strong roles for civil society in government oversight. One Muslim contact, who favors a democratic but Shari'a-based autonomous region, said Muslim civil society groups would closely monitor the MILF after a peace agreement, aware of the potential for corruption and mismanagement because of the MILF's lack of governance experience. Another contact, who represents young Muslim professionals, expressed concern that the MILF's vision of a "Moro homeland" was too exclusive of other kinds of Muslims and was not sufficiently worldly in its outlook. Some young Muslims from Mindanao, the contact said, consider their "Muslim" or "Filipino" identities more central to their character than their "Moro" identity -- an opinion that staunch MILF supporters were disappointed to hear. On leadership, a well-connected Maguindanao sourced noted that the MILF was considering Sultan Kudarat Governor Pax Mangudadatu, the uncle of Buluan Mayor Ismael Mangudadatu, whose wife and other family members died in a November 23 massacre (Ref A), for the governorship of a new autonomous region -- a position that the MILF assumed would be appointed rather than elected.

COMMENT

19. (C) With President Arroyo and Datuk Othman now pushing for a peace agreement within the next five months, negotiations are expected to move at a faster clip, with a working draft to be produced by the end of January so the government can show progress before the official start of the campaign season on February 9. If, as we are hearing from contacts, the parties are still far apart in their positions, or if the MILF does not accept the notion of a peace agreement grounded in Philippine law, it may prove impossible to conclude a comprehensive peace agreement during President

Arroyo's time in office.
KENNEY